4: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1948 FJ22 Nuer FJ22

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AFRICA

JOURNAL OF THE
INTERNATIONAL AFRICAN INSTITUTE

JOURNAL DE
L'INSTITUT INTERNATIONAL AFRICAIN

ZEITSCHRIFT DES
INTERNATIONALEN AFRIKANISCHEN INSTITUTS

Editor
DARYLL FORDE

VOLUME XVIII
1948

LONDON
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
GEOFFREY CUMBERLEGE

[p.i]

4: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1948 FJ22 Nuer FJ22

NUER MARRIAGE CEREMONIES[1]

E. E. EVANS-PRITCHARD

581 MARRIAGE among the Nuer is brought about by payment of bridewealth and
585 by the performance of certain ceremonial rites. The rites cannot take place
431 without the payments, but transfers of cattle do not by themselves bring about the union. Both are necessary and they proceed in a connected movement towards the full establishment of the union. Each enforces and reinforces the other. The bride's people can, by holding up the rites, put pressure on the bridegroom's people to make the payments due to them, and the bridegroom's people can, by withholding the cattle, induce the girl's family and kin to advance the ceremonies. First one pedal is pressed down and then the other as the marriage is propelled to its appointed end, the birth of children and the sharing of a home. It is understood that payments should have reached a certain point before a certain rite is held, and the performance of the rite is a recognition of the transfer of cattle up to that point. Payments of cattle and marriage rites therefore tend to alternate, though there is no fixity about the alternation and no marriage is exactly the same as another in this respect. The new social ties of conjugality and affinity are made stronger by each payment and by each ceremony, so that a marriage which is insecure at the beginning of the negotiations becomes surer with every new payment and rite; both sides, by the giving and receiving of cattle and by joint participation in the rites, becoming more deeply committed to bringing about the union. Therefore a marriage which has reached the final rites may be regarded as a stable union and will generally prove to be so.

Some General Features of the Ceremonies

584 The chief ceremonies are the *lareing*, the *agut*, and the *aaut*: the betrothal, the
585 wedding, and the consummation. All three are important public events in Nuer life,
574 though the betrothal rites are not held on so large a scale to the west of the Nile as to the east. Preparations for them are made days, even weeks, ahead, and they are talked about; especially by the young people, long before they take place. They are usually held in the rains, for there is then plenty of millet for porridge and beer, and people have the energy of the well-fed and can travel long distances without fatigue and dance and make love with equal vigour. A whole district attends them, young men thinking nothing of walking over ten miles to take part in the dancing, the mere coming together of so many people making marriage a memorable event. Neighbours thus bear witness to the creation of the new social ties and by their presence sanction them.

Neighbours form the crowd at marriage feasts. They have no direct concern with the union. Apart from these people who attend the ceremonies for dancing and

[1] This description of marriage ceremonies which I have seen, some of them many times, when living among the Nuer of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, is part of a general account of Nuer marriage, some sections of which have already been published. *Some Aspects of Marriage and the Family among the Nuer*, Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, 1945 (first published in 1932 in the *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Rechtswissenschaft*); and 'Nuer Bridewealth', *Africa*, vol. xvi, no. 4, 1946. The sociological and political background is given in *The Nuer*, Clarendon Press, 1940.

4: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1948 FJ22 Nuer FJ22

584 585 574

flirting and for the general sociability and excitement, are those who attend them for more serious purposes. It will be seen from this paper that there are always, besides prolonged discussions about bridewealth, sacrifices, and other rites which have to be performed and which interest only some of the people present—the families and kin of the bride and bridegroom. These are the rites which express the relations between husband and wife, husband's kin and wife's kin, and between the kin on one side or the other and the ghosts and spirits of their lineage. Those who stand outside these relationships are only spectators and very often pay no attention to the rites at all. It is the dance which gives to the ceremonies their popularity and publicity; it is the rites which express and bring about their purpose.

An essential rite in the marriage ceremonies is the sacrifice of a beast to the ghosts and spirits by which they are made cognizant, and witnesses, of the union in an address delivered to them before the beast is slain. This part of the rite concerns only the close kin of the bride or bridegroom and the address is sometimes spoken in so low a tone that it is almost inaudible amid the general clamour. People chat and shout to each other about affairs which have no connexion with the marriage, or interpolate comments into the address, a long rambling speech which may refer to almost anything which interests the speaker so long as he mentions the object of the rite and puts into it now and again some traditional phrases. The young people are dancing, the women engaged in household tasks, and it is the older men, mostly kinsmen of the bride and bridegroom, who gather round to watch the sacrifice, which to them is just one of the phases of the ceremony, like the bridewealth talks and the beer-drinking, and does not entail any special attitude on their part. The sacrifice also is often a great confusion, everyone shouting advice and instructions to everyone else and arguing good-humouredly about the division of the meat. The specifically religious part of a ceremony seems to be lost amid all the talk and movement, but it is none the less the core of the ceremony, what occasions it and gives it meaning.

Even the kinsmen of the bride or bridegroom, as the case may be, attend the sacrifice largely because it is the prelude to a division of meat, for though the ox is dedicated to the ghosts and spirits, its material destiny is to be eaten by the kin of one partner to the marriage, who, being guests, have to be provided with meat by the kin of the other partner. The people who sacrifice the beast, usually an ox, eat very little of it. They are interested in the religious part of the rite since it is their ancestors and spirits to whom the beast is dedicated. The visitors are not concerned with the ghosts and spirits of the other party but are interested in the meat which is their due, to each kinsman his customary portion. A sacrifice is thus a distribution of gifts of meat by the kin of one of the spouses to the kin of the other.

One notices the same lack of formality in the order of the rites, and the sequence of their parts, as in the performance of them. The place of each movement is determined only by the logic of necessity. An ox has to be pegged before it can be speared and it has to be skinned before it can be cut up and cooked. Otherwise there is merely a usual time for acts to be done, though it would not matter if they were done at a different time or in a different order. For example, it is usual to sacrifice an ox at the betrothal ceremony towards the end of the evening dance, but it can equally well be done on the following morning. Nuer ritual procedure is generally happy-go-lucky.

4: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1948 FJ22 Nuer FJ22

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The Preliminaries

Generally, there has long been an understanding between the youth and the girl he wishes to marry and she has been his sweetheart (*luw*), though sometimes a youth decks himself as a bridegroom, and in the company of another youth, arrayed in the ornaments of a best man, tours the countryside in search of a bride. In either case, the youth will not ask for the hand of the girl without her consent.[1] A maiden consents to marry a youth only if he has cattle. He and his friends must then ask her family and they will consult their kinsfolk. So long as there is no kinship bar to the marriage and the youth has both cattle and a good reputation they are not likely to reject his suit. They know what is going on long before they are formally asked for her hand, so when a girl tells her menfolk in the byre that there are guests outside who wish to speak to them, the men know what they have come for. The suitor and his friends enter the byre and seat themselves to the right, the girl's people being seated to the left. They say that the girl has accepted them and ask whether the elders will accept them also. The elders ask them what cattle they have. This is the *riet ghok*, the cattle talk. The best man answers for the suitor, who, to create a good impression, says as little as possible. Both wear skins to cover their genitals before possible future parents-in-law. The bridegroom's best man and two other friends accompany him through all the trials of marriage and take full advantage of the opportunities for love-making and courtship. The girl's people accept the suit in a preliminary way and the youths depart to eat at a neighbouring homestead, since they cannot eat in the home of the bride at this stage.

There will later be other and more formal and definite discussions about the cattle in the byre of the father of the girl. The suitor has in the meanwhile been able to consult his own family and kinsmen and when he returns with his friends for further talks the cattle are more precisely specified and ear-marked for particular claimants. The girl's people are satisfied. They say that the marriage is finished and tell the bridegroom, as he can now properly be called, and his friends to bring the *ghok lipa*, the cattle of betrothal, on a certain day. The discussions are still in an early stage and by 'finished' they mean only that they are prepared to continue negotiations on the basis of the demands already met and to hold the betrothal ceremony. Before the visitors rise to go, various men who can claim distant cognatic kinship with the bride, too distant for them to receive assigned portions of the bride-wealth, may ask for gifts, ranging from a 'cow' (which means a sheep or goat) to a spear. Some of their demands are at once satisfied, the spears being handed over there and then, while others are met with promises or evasions.

The Betrothal

A betrothal ceremony, *larving* or *bul luw*, is not necessary. It is possible to proceed at once to the full wedding ceremony, and this is sometimes done when the bridegroom is a rich man with plenty of cattle and the bride is a *jur*, a girl who has passed the usual age of marriage. Usually the betrothal ceremony is held in the rainy season and the wedding in the following windy season. If there is a longer interval it is

[1] It occasionally happens that a man marries a child to his small son. When he does so he puts a bracelet on her arm and later pays a few head of cattle. However, when the boy grows up he will try to win the girl by courting her. If he does not gain her favour he is unlikely to marry her.

4: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1948 FJ22 Nuer FJ22

584 generally due to poverty. A poor suitor pays two or three cows to a man who is short of stock at the time in order to obtain a lien on his small daughter while he collects adequate bridewealth to marry her later. Were the suitor a richer man he would seek a bride among older maidens, and were the father a richer man he would not feel the need to betroth his daughter at so early an age. A nubile maiden would not be betrothed for several years to a poor man. Her brothers would not brook the delay, for they themselves want to marry with the cattle of her bridewealth. Moreover, she would almost certainly become pregnant by some lover.

The holding of the *larving* ceremony means that the marriage is provisionally agreed upon by both sides, and the transfer to the bride's family of the *ghok lipa* or *ghok luom*, the cattle of the betrothal, maybe three or four to ten head, is a further acknowledgement of this understanding. Before the ceremony takes place it has been agreed upon in general terms how many cattle should eventually be handed over. The ceremony is held in the bride's home. When the morning work of the kraal is finished the bridegroom and his party drive before them the cattle of the betrothal, led by a fine ox, the pride of the herd, its horns decorated with tassels, for the bride's brother. They advance on the bride's village in war formation and continue their martial exercises in her father's kraal, chanting their war songs before the huts and byres, especially before the hut of the bride's mother, who must be shown particular respect. The bridegroom's girl relatives and friends arrive about the same time as the men and they also dance in the kraal. The youths of the bride's village then form their *dep*, village fighting formation, and start their own exercises and the girls of the village their dancing. Then the drums are brought out and general dancing begins. Towards sunset the betrothal cattle, which were left outside the village to graze, are brought into the kraal and tethered. Dancing, duelling, singing, and love-making between the youths and maidens continue well into the night, and all pay special attention to the bridegroom, resplendent with his ivory armlets and a coil of brass twisted round his arm, and distinguished also by the *dang*, wedding stick, in his hand. Before midnight the father of the bride leads forth an ox which, with a ceremonial rubbing of ashes (*buk*) on its back, is dedicated to the lineage ghosts and spirits in a long address (*law*) by the *gaar batke*[1] of the lineage. He tells the spirits to take their ox and let the people be at peace. His address is followed by shorter speeches by old men of the bride's kindred and perhaps by her father, all first rubbing ashes on the beast's back. The *jiena*, the bridegroom's people, take no part in these proceedings, but the flesh of the sacrifice is, with the exception of head, neck, and some of the entrails, their right, and if the ox is not to their liking they insist on a bigger one being sacrificed or, which amounts to the same thing from their point of view, being slaughtered for their dinner. When the addresses are finished the *gaar batke* of the bride's lineage, or her father or another of her senior kinsmen, stabs the ox—the *yang luom* as it is called—to the heart with a single thrust. It stands for a moment and falls to the ground, those present watching to see that it falls cleanly. The bridegroom's people, often directed by the bridegroom, though he may not himself eat in the home of his future father-in-law, amid much shouting and chaffing, divide the meat among themselves, each kinsman receiving his customary due. The ribs and part of the back are taken next day by the visiting girls to their parents and

[1] *Gaar batke*: the man who performs the appropriate rituals on special occasions.

4: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1948 FJ22 Nuer FJ22

elders in the bridegroom's village and the rest is eaten on the spot. The girls of the bride's village who, like its menfolk, receive little or none of the meat, are up half the night cooking porridge, preparing beer, and boiling the meat for their guests, for the girls of the bridegroom's party are too busy flirting with the youths to assist them.

In the morning there is more dancing and beer is served to the guests before they depart. Shortly before they go the bridegroom, if he has not done so earlier, throws on to the threshold of his mother-in-law's hut, if she has not yet reached the menopause, a tethering-cord, as an earnest that the *yang pal*, a cow to prolong her fertility, will be paid. He will already have given her a present of tobacco.

The wedding takes place some weeks later and in the meanwhile there are further discussions about bridewealth not only in the home of the bride's father but also in the home of her senior maternal uncle, who is responsible for the negotiations on the mother's side. His claims are less flexible and there cannot be much dispute about them, so it sometimes happens that they are settled provisionally in the father's byre and that the final discussions with the uncle himself, who may live far away, are left till after the wedding or even till after the consummation. Some more cattle will probably be handed over before the wedding.

Between the betrothal and the wedding the bridegroom is *lipe nyal*, a man to whom a bride is affianced, but he and she are spoken of as man and wife and the bridegroom acts towards his in-laws with the full respect due from a son-in-law. From time to time he visits his wife's home in the company of his best man and other friends, and on these occasions he may try to cohabit with his wife, but it will be difficult for him because he is closely watched and others probably share the hut in which he and she are sleeping. In any case he cannot enforce marital rights at this stage and his only hope is to get his best man to persuade his bride to visit him in the gardens.

The Wedding

Both sides want to complete the marriage without undue delay. The bridegroom's people want their wife and the bride's people want their cattle so that they themselves can marry. They do not care to use the cattle of the betrothal for this purpose because these are only on pledge and, if negotiations break down, have at once to be returned, or others substituted if they have died. In the interval between betrothal and wedding ceremonies a penultimate agreement is reached about the cattle and both parties have had time to accommodate themselves to their new interrelationships. Neither party would pursue the marriage to the point of holding the wedding, with its expense and publicity, unless they were confident of the outcome.

Arrangements are made to hold the wedding on a certain day. In the homestead of the bride the reception, especially the beer, is being prepared, and in the homestead of the bridegroom there is much rejoicing, men and women chanting songs or poems into the night. They also chant on their way to the wedding and during its celebration. The main features of a wedding (*kwiɔ*) are discussion about cattle in the morning and the invocation over the cattle of the bridewealth (*twɔr gluɔ̈l*), the wedding dance, and the wedding sacrifice, in the afternoon and evening.

Early in the morning the bridegroom's kin discuss the situation in his father's byre. They know what outstanding claims are likely to be advanced because they

4: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1948 FJ22 Nuer FJ22

585 know the persons on the other side who stand in those relationships to the bride to which beasts are due by custom. They run over their herds and assign particular beasts to meet probable claims, so that no last-moment demand shall be made which they have not allowed for or cannot reject. Similar talks are going on among the bride's kin in her father's byre. They know more or less what animals the bridegroom can muster and they have also to agree on the division of the bridewealth among themselves; the problem often being not so much the total number of beasts to be paid but to which of the bride's kin they shall be allotted. The bride's father will do his best to protect his son-in-law against too greedy kinsmen. As we have seen, the bridegroom's people have several times discussed the whole question of the bridewealth with the bride's people, but there are certain to be demands not yet agreed to, or kept back till the last moment, so that they can be exacted under threat of forbidding the wedding dance.

The older people of the bridegroom's kin go ahead of the bridegroom's party of youths and maidens to the bride's home to finish the discussions in the late morning and early afternoon. They are generally still arguing when the bridegroom's party arrives, the paternal uncles on both sides taking the foremost part, for it is thought impolite of the fathers to take too prominent a part in the discussions, especially if they are younger than the uncles. The bridegroom's kin sit on the right side of the byre and the bride's kin, often called *jitwar*, on the left side, as they would sit were a case being arbitrated between them by a leopard-skin chief. The byre has been swept clean in expectation of the guests, and ox-hides and mats have been spread on the floor. The bridegroom and his *gwan buthni* and the bride's father and his *gwan buthni* wear wild-cat skins round their loins to hide their nakedness, and the *gwan buthni* of the bridegroom holds a wedding stick across his knees (occasionally a woman officiates in this capacity). After the involved Nuer greetings have been exchanged they begin the final cattle talk over their pipes, each claim being stated and restated and discussed in the deliberate Nuer way—a few words, puff, puff of tobacco, a few words, then puff, puff, puff again. While the *jiewic* people with rights to cattle of the bridewealth, are developing their claims, first on the father's side, then on the mother's side, the *gwan buthni* of the bride brings a tray on which are lumps of tobacco and an equal number of pieces of charcoal and hands these round to the bridegroom's senior relatives. The cattle talk, even at this stage, is often loud and it looks, till one is used to Nuer, as though agreement would be impossible.

While the discussions are going on in the byre, the youths of the bridegroom's village charge into the homestead, chanting and skirmishing as they come. They rush the kraal and the bridegroom hurls his spear at his mother-in-law's *buor*, while the girls of the bride's village attack the visiting youths in mock combat and try to catch the bridegroom and seize his wedding stick. If they succeed he will have to pay them a calf. The *buor* is a mud windscreen, such as every Nuer woman has in front of her fireplace outside her hut; it is the symbol of domesticity and of wifely status and is associated with the spirit of the husband's lineage. On the occasion of the marriage of a daughter of the hut the windscreen is heightened, or a new one is constructed for the bridegroom to spear, and some of his close kinsmen may spear it also. It is easily repaired. The spear belongs to the mother of the bride, but as it is a war spear one of the men of her homestead grabs it. The bridegroom

4: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1948 FJ22 Nuer FJ22

585

has already given, or promised, her a pipe, tobacco, and a smaller spear, which she may give to a small son or keep for scraping hides. The bridegroom may also throw a spear into the threshold of the byre. This goes to his father-in-law. Other parties of youths from nearby villages are by this time beginning to arrive, for the wedding was announced by drums on the previous day. It is difficult for the older people, still talking in the byre and puffing away at their pipes and drinking beer, to hold up the dance any longer. They give permission for it to begin and it continues for the rest of the afternoon and well into the night and is resumed on the following morning.

Before the dance begins, or as soon as it has begun, the kin on both sides signify their approval of the marriage by calling out the spear-names of the lineages of the bride and bridegroom and invoking the ghosts of their ancestors to look upon the cattle of the bridewealth—a rite which makes them partners to the union and witnesses of it. The *gwan buthni* of the bride—his role is ritual and he has no part in the bridewealth talks—rises and demands a cow and receives the promise of a calf or sheep. He then walks up and down the byre, brandishing his spear and delivering a long address. He shouts out his ox-name and the spear-name of his lineage and he calls on the ghosts of the bride's ancestors to witness that she is married openly with 50 cattle (it is conventional to say this number) and not with shame and by stealth. He says that she will bear her husband a male child. He addresses also the bridegroom's kin, his own kin, and anybody else he feels inclined to bring into his speech, and while talking he pours beer and sprinkles a little tobacco on the floor of the byre, on its threshold, and on the hearth in the centre of it, asking God (*Gwandong*) to take his 'cow', the tobacco. Then the *gwan buthni* of the bridegroom's lineage, whose role is also purely ritual, has his say, or he may speak first. He talks in much the same vein and also pours out beer and sprinkles tobacco in sacrifice as he walks up and down the byre brandishing, instead of a spear, a wedding stick. The father of the bride may then speak and may be followed by a senior kinsman of the bridegroom. Then people chant poems.

During the dance another rite, but not of the same importance, takes place. The father of the bride removes a tethering cord from one of the pegs in the kraal and throws it into the air between two lines of men drawn up for the purpose, the bride's relatives on one side and the bridegroom's relatives on the other. They try to hook it in the air with their spears and clubs and whoever catches it may demand a calf or a goat from the opposite side, though he cannot be sure of receiving it.

Towards sunset, or on the following morning, the marriage ox, provided by the bride's father, is sacrificed by the *gwan buthni* of her lineage or a senior kinsman. He rubs ashes on its back and speaks to it saying: 'We do not kill you for an evil thing, we kill you about a good thing. Fall well.' It is a wedding ox and not a funeral ox. The meat, except for the head, neck, and a few other bits, goes to the bridegroom's kin who, as in the betrothal ceremony, divide the carcass, on the principle determining the division of bridewealth, between the kin *kwi gwan*, on the father's side, and those, *kwi mam*, on the mother's side. The distribution at these ceremonies depends on the number of relationships represented by persons or proxy, the number of persons standing in these relationships, and other circumstances. Most of the meat is taken back by the bridegroom's people to their homes for the older people

4: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1948 FJ22 Nuer FJ22

585 who have not been able to attend the wedding and those who have remained to look after the herds and milk the cows. The rest is eaten on the spot.

A large part of the night is spent in dancing and flirting and love-making. The bride and the girls of her homestead are cooking while the bridegroom, who is fasting, is seeing that his companions are being properly looked after. On the following morning beer is served, pots being distributed to the bridegroom's kin, his father, his father's full-brother, his father's half-brother, his paternal and maternal aunts, and his mother's full- and half-brothers, who share the beer with members of their age-sets. After a meal the youths resume dancing and their elders, fortified with beer, probably start once more on the seemingly endless cattle talks, for there are generally an odd claim or two outstanding, the discussion of which was interrupted by the wedding dance, though their settlement was assured before it began.

The *ngut* does not conclude the marriage. It is the *mut* and the birth of a child which do this. But the chances are now overwhelmingly in favour of a successful conclusion, for had the bride's people not been satisfied with the bridewealth already handed over, or promised, they would not have allowed the dance to proceed. The wedding has also cost them a second ox for which there is no return in the event of the marriage not being consummated. Nevertheless, marriages do occasionally break up between wedding and consummation, though, in my experience, this is rare and is due to the reluctance of the bride rather than to objections or demands on the part of her family and kin.

If the maternal uncle of the bride lives too far away for his people to attend the bridewealth talks and the wedding, talks will be held later in his byre to settle the cattle due to him and his brothers and sisters, and he may give a wedding dance on his own account and sacrifice an ox at it. He may even do this when the father and he are members of the same large village. The senior paternal uncle occasionally does the same if he lives far away and is the father's half-brother.

The Consummation

The *mut*, the third of the three public marriage ceremonies, is the one which, at any rate among the eastern Nuer,[1] makes the union legally binding. After it the husband, as he can then be called, can claim compensation for adultery, which he could not have done before. Previously the bride's brothers did not feel it obligatory to prevent her from attending evening dances in the neighbourhood, though they well knew from their own experience that she was likely to have relations with old sweethearts at them. Her future husband's people could not then complain if she attended these dances, whereas after the *mut* they would make an unpleasant scene were they to find her at one, for this ceremony makes man and wife, and the cattle which have been paid are no longer regarded as a pledge but as marriage cattle. They now say of the bride *Te yang jokde* ('She has cattle on her back'). Moreover, if cattle paid to the bride's family and kin die in their kraals before the *mut*—and they may all die in a year of rinderpest—they have to be replaced by the bridegroom's people, whereas if they die after the *mut* they still count as part of the bridewealth and the husband's people do not have to substitute for them similar beasts. This

[1] Among the western Nuer it would seem to be the *twor glok*, the invocation of the ghosts, which permits a suit of adultery and may therefore be considered the action which makes the union a contract.

4: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1948 FJ22 Nuer FJ22

distinction does not apply to animals killed by the bride's family and kin or which have been disposed of by them and have died outside their kraals, for these count as bridewealth before, as well as after, the consummation. On the other hand, any calves the cattle may bear before this ceremony count as original bridewealth and not as increment. Likewise, if the incomplete union is broken before the *mut*, all the cattle and their increase, including those which have died, must be returned, whereas in the event of divorce after the *mut* the bride's people do not have to return animals which have died a natural death in their own kraals, and they have a right to retain two cows, the *yang yani* and the *yang miemne*, the cow of the skirt, the mark of married status, and the cow of the hair, which is shaved off the bride's head at the consummation. 585

It is the *mut* therefore which makes the union a contract. Consequently, it occasionally happens, when people are anxious to expedite the marriage, that the consummation takes place before the wedding. I heard it suggested that this should be done in the case of a youth who had been speared and could not take the bridegroom's usual part in weddings, and although it was decided to hold the wedding first, with the bridegroom as a spectator, no one suggested that in the circumstances a reversal of the ceremonies would have been improper. Mrs. Smith, of the American Mission, told me of a case of an elderly man who, desiring to marry a girl with the approval of her family but against her own wishes, prevailed on her relatives to rush her through the *mut*, leaving the wedding to be held later.

The day of the consummation has to be fixed in advance because beer has to be brewed for the visitors. In the early morning the bridegroom goes with a company of the youths of his village to fetch the bride, his womenfolk remaining behind to prepare for their visitors. They chant on the way, for this is a happy occasion for the village. Sometimes they find on arrival that the bride's mother has prepared beer for them. They have to ask her permission to take her daughter away and she asks them for presents before she gives it, such things as a spear, armlets, a pipe, and tobacco. The young men promise to give her what she asks for and depart, escorting the bride and her girl companions, who have oiled and decked themselves with ornaments for the ceremony. They go chanting to the bridegroom's village, one of the poems often being a composition of the bride in honour of her future husband, and there is much horseplay between the sexes. When they near the village the young men go ahead and the girls are met by the youths of the village who bring them into the kraal where they serenade the bridegroom's mother with poems outside her hut. The ceremony is mostly a female affair, the men looking on.

After a while a kinsman of the bridegroom places a tethering-cord across the inner threshold of one of the huts and the bridegroom crawls over it, followed by the bride, the best man, and a special girl friend of the bride. This action is said to make the marriage fruitful. Then, towards evening, takes place the rite of consummation, though it must be said again that there is no invariable order of events in these ceremonies and no fixed time-table. The bride retires to a hut wearing a special goatskin cap and here the bridegroom joins her. His age-mates seek him out and say to him: 'Come now, let the people go to bed, come and loosen the bride's girdle.' He is bashful and gets the business over as quickly and inconspicuously as he can. He enters the hut and gives his bride a cut with a switch and seizes her thigh, she

842 585 833 585

4: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1948 FJ22 Nuer FJ22

refusing his advances and crouching by the wall of the hut. He strikes her with a tethering-cord, snatches the cap off her head, breaks her girdle, and consummates the marriage. Reluctance is imposed on her by custom and she pretends to resist even when she has known her husband often before in the gardens. In Nuerland it is most unlikely that a bride will be a virgin. That is not expected. Wedding and consummation ceremonies are held even for a girl who is pregnant or one who has been divorced and is being married a second time if she has not borne children. They say that 'She has returned to maidenhood.' It is only divorced women who have led profligate lives who are not remarried with these ceremonies. Maidenhood is a social, not a physical, state.

His duty done, the bridegroom leaves the hut, sometimes the bride's girl friends rushing at him and beating him with their fists as he emerges. The rest of the evening is given to the favourite pastimes of Nuer youth, *muong* and *lum*, flirting with the girls and making love to them. There will be many youths present: the people of the bridegroom's homestead, his mother's kin, if they live near, the local *dep*, the youths of the village, and bands of youths from villages for miles round, for the *mut* is a popular ceremony and it is known that many girls will attend it. Then all retire for the night, the bride's companions sleeping in a hut reserved for them.

On the following morning take place three rites which may on no account be omitted, the sacrifice (which may take place the evening before), the lustration, and the shaving of the bride's head. The sacrificial beast should be an ox, but if the bridegroom's father is poor, and at this stage of the marriage he is likely to be hard up, the *yang nuot*, the 'cow' of the consummation, may be a goat, or even just beer. The bridegroom's *gwan buthni* rubs ashes on its back, calls out the spear-name of his lineage and speaks of the beast and the bride, telling the spirits and ghosts of his lineage to witness the union and to bless it with sons so that the lineage may continue. He says to them, 'Now you see your ox; you see this maid; let her be a good wife; let her bear many children, many sons; let her work well in her husband's home, milk the cows, dry the cattle dung; let her be a faithful wife and not a profligate'; and so forth, asking them to make the union a lasting and happy one. He then spears the ox and it is cut up by the wife's people, the visitors, and divided among them in the customary portions, only the head, neck, and a few other pieces of meat going to the people of the bridegroom. The visiting maidens at once cook and eat the ribs, kidneys, and stomach, besides filling themselves with porridge and beer, the bride alone abstaining because she may not eat in the home of her mother-in-law. They take the rest of the carcass back to their homes for their elders. As generally happens when there is a feast, outsiders, persons not of the bridegroom's closest kin, hang about the carcass like kites when it is being cut up, hoping to obtain a piece of meat by begging, snatching, or persistently getting in the way. There is much shouting, argument, and general confusion. The *gwan buthni* may perform another duty associated with his office in anointing the bride with butter. Her father will already have blessed her in this manner before she set out to go to her husband's home.

Now takes place the rite of lustration, the *lak teetni ka ciik*, the washing of the hands with bracelets. The visiting maidens, the young wife's companions, sit in a hut and a pot of warm water is passed to them. One of them washes her hands in the water and then takes a bracelet off her arm, drops it into the pot, and passes the pot to one

4: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1948 FJ22 Nuer FJ22

of the husband's kinsfolk outside, who, squatting in front of it, likewise washes his hands in the water, and then fishes out the bracelet. The pot is returned to the hut and a different maiden and a different kinsman repeat the action of the first pair. All the close kinsfolk of the husband—his father's brothers and sisters, his mother's brothers and sisters, and his own brothers and sisters, and so on—are supposed to receive a bracelet, but, in fact, persons standing in some of these relationships will be absent and any person who can claim kinship with the husband can demand a bracelet. If a man's dip into the pot reveals a poor bracelet he does not hesitate to upbraid the girl who put it there and he may select a better one from those on her arm.

The concluding rite of the ceremony is the act from which it derives its name, the shaving of the wife's head (*mut nyier*) by a member of her husband's family. This may take place after the departure of her companions, for it is a domestic affair of the husband's *gol*, his home, of which the wife is now a member. The shaving of the head signifies this change in her status. People speak of the rite as *woci miem nyietde*, the removal of the hairs of maidenhood, and they say afterwards of the girl *Caa cek*, 'She has become a wife'. She is at the same time stripped of all her ornaments, which are divided among her husband's kin, and she is arrayed in new finery provided by her husband. She belongs to his, and not her father's, people now and it is for them to adorn her.

The Birth of a Child

The *mut* is the consummation of marriage, but not its completion, which is the birth of a child. The young wife is now called *cek ma kan*, a newly wed. Her parents give her a hut of her own and a sleeping-hide, a brush, and a couple of gourds for ablutions. When her husband comes to visit her in her father's homestead he sleeps with her in this hut. She continues in all other respects to lead the life she led before marriage, and after her husband's visits she hangs up the hide and domestic utensils and sleeps with her unmarried sisters. On these visits her husband stays at a neighbouring homestead as he cannot eat in the home of his parents-in-law and ought not to be seen there at all. When someone tells the wife that her husband has come, so that she may prepare for him, she feigns annoyance or lack of interest, pretending that she is still unmarried, a shyness she keeps up with third persons, though she is at ease when alone with her husband. When everyone is asleep he visits her and spends the night with her, leaving before any of the bride's people are about; her parents are supposed to know nothing of his visits, though, of course, they know all about his movements and it is even said that his mother-in-law may rise especially early and squint through a crack in the door of her hut in order to see him depart. Should he oversleep, and his mother-in-law sees his spears outside her daughter's hut, she makes them forfeit and he would be ashamed to ask for them back. It is not till a child has been born that the husband is accepted by his wife's people as one of themselves; he is then the father of their daughter's child and through the child has a kind of kinship link with them. Till this happens the husband continues to lead the life he lived before marriage, a bachelor life with his younger brothers in their father's byre. His wife visits him only on rare occasions and for a formal purpose, as when, at harvest time, she brings him coverings she has made for the grain on the drying-platforms, or when she takes him a bundle of well-cooked porridge made

4: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1948 FJ22 Nuer FJ22

from the first millet of the year—a pretty custom known as *puthem kwon*, honouring with porridge.

All are equally anxious for a child to be born, the husband and wife because they want a son and the wife's parents and kin because they cannot, without risking complications, dispose of the cattle of the marriage till a first-born completes the union. Those whose daughters they might wish to marry would not be happy about accepting such cattle as bridewealth in case they had suddenly to be returned to the husband. When a child is born the mother remains with her parents till she has weaned it. This is a suitable regulation, because after the bridewealth has been paid the husband's father is likely to be short of lactating cows, while the wife's parents will have plenty of milk from their herd. If, for some reason, the wife goes to live with her husband before the child is weaned, it may not be weaned without the consent of her parents, and I have seen a husband pay several cattle to atone for contravention of this rule. A *ker*, first child, belongs to the home of his maternal grandparents and if he is weaned in his father's home he returns to live with them, a boy till he is initiated and a girl till she is betrothed. This is the rule, though there is variation in practice, depending on the ability of the maternal grandparents to support the child and on the relations between them and their son-in-law.

Shortly after the birth of her first-born the wife, now called *pai dap*, a nursing mother, brings the baby to her husband's home and lays him in the ashes of the hearth in the centre of his grandfather's byre, a rite known as *nong puka*, the bringing to the ashes. Beer has been prepared and is drunk by a few senior kinsmen of the husband who live in his hamlet. It is a domestic, and not a public, ceremony. The wife spends a few days in her husband's home and returns with the child to the village of her parents. She has as yet no hut of her own in her husband's homestead.

When his first-born has been weaned the husband builds his wife a hut in his father's homestead facing the family kraal. He then goes to ask his parents-in-law for his wife. They do not deny him, even if, as is likely, some of the bridewealth cattle are still owing. They give her a horn spoon and a gourd and she takes these with her to her husband's home. The gift of a spoon is emphasized by the Nuer in speaking of marriage, because it is a recognition that the woman is now, in the full sense, a wife, who will eat of the porridge of her own gardens with the milk of her own herd. She now milks her husband's cows instead of her father's and hoes the gardens of his home and not those of her childhood. Before she is given a spoon, even if she hoes a garden at her husband's home she takes the harvest back to her father, or she may live at her husband's home and cultivate in her father's village, if it is not far. It is only when a man's bride has borne him a child and tends his hearth that she becomes, in the Nuer sense, his wife. She then makes a *bwor*, a mud fire-screen, and the spirit of his lineage comes to dwell there. Later his father tells him to build a byre and gives him a few cows to start a herd.

The marriage has thus reached completion through many stages: betrothal ceremony, wedding ceremony, consummation ceremony, the birth of a child, the bringing of the first-born to his father's byre, and the presentation to the wife of a spoon as a sign of her domestic separation from her family. She comes to her husband's home not as a wife but as a mother whose breasts have suckled a child of their lineage.